

## Purposes of Assessment and Evaluation

The purpose of assessment and evaluation is to support and enhance the child's learning. Thoughtful, sensitive, accurate, supportive assessment and evaluation are prerequisites for learning. They are crucial in enhancing children's growth and development. They are fundamental to the success of the primary program. Assessments and evaluations are used to make decisions about the learning process **of every child** on a continuous basis.

Assessing and teaching are inseparable and intertwined processes. As part of the teaching-learning process, effective assessment will:

- Gather evidence on what a child can do, determining individual strengths and learning needs
- Help the teacher make informed instructional decisions, set learning goals, and shape a curriculum based on the strengths and needs of the child
- Provide feedback to the child
- Help the child develop and value the practice of assessing and evaluating his or her own learning
- Promote the child's growth and development in all goal areas of the program
- Provide a basis for communicating progress to the child, to the parents, to school personnel, and to the community
- Nurture and develop a positive self-concept in the child
- Enable the learner and promote lifelong learning



*Teachers nurture the process of self-evaluation as they guide children to be reflective and as they help children recognize their accomplishments and identify their learning needs. With repeated opportunities to evaluate their work, children understand the significance of self-evaluation as a tool for lifelong learning.*

In 1998, the Goal I Early Childhood Assessments Resource Group included the following information and recommendations in their report that was submitted to The National Goals Panel (pp. 6–7, 35–36):

### **Important Purposes of Assessment for Young Children**

The intended use of an assessment—its purpose—determines every other aspect of how the assessment is conducted. Purpose determines the content of the assessment (What should be measured?); methods of data collection (Should the procedures be standardized? Can data come from the child, the parent, or the teacher?); technical requirements of the assessment (What level of reliability and validity must be established?); and, finally, the stakes or consequences of the assessment, which in turn determine the kinds of safeguards necessary to protect against potential harm from fallible assessment-based decisions.

*There should be no high-stakes accountability testing of individual children before the end of third grade.*

Goal I Early Childhood  
Assessments Resource  
Group, 1998

For example, if data from a statewide assessment are going to be used for school accountability, then it is important that data be collected in a standardized way to ensure comparability of school results. If children in some schools are given practice ahead of time so that they will be familiar with the task formats, then children in all schools should be provided with the same practice; teachers should not give help during the assessment or restate the questions unless it is part of the standard administration to do so; and all of the

assessments should be administered in approximately the same week of the school year.

In contrast, when a teacher is working with an individual child in a classroom trying to help that child learn, assessments almost always occur in the context of activities and tasks that are already familiar, so practice or task familiarity is not at issue. In the classroom context, teachers may well provide help while assessing to take advantage of the learning opportunity and to figure out exactly how a child is thinking by seeing what kind of help makes it possible to take the next steps. For teaching and learning purposes, the timing of assessments makes the most sense if they occur on an ongoing basis as particular skills and content are being learned. Good classroom assessment is disciplined, not haphazard, and, with training, teachers' expectations can reflect common standards. Nonetheless, assessments devised by teachers as part of the learning process lack the uniformity and the standardization that is necessary to ensure comparability, essential for accountability purposes.

Similarly, the technical standards for reliability and validity are much more stringent for high-stakes accountability assessment than for informal assessments used by individual caregivers and teachers to help children learn. The consequences of accountability assessments are much greater, so the instruments used must be sufficiently accurate to ensure that important decisions about a child are not made as the result of measurement error. In addition, accountability assessments are usually "one-shot," stand-alone events. In contrast, caregivers and teachers are constantly collecting information over long periods of time and do not make high-stakes decisions. If they are wrong one day about what a child knows or is able to do, then the error is easily remedied the next day.

Serious misuses of testing with young children occur when assessments intended for one purpose are used inappropriately for other purposes. For example, the content of IQ measures intended to identify children for special education is not appropriate content to use in planning instruction. At the same time, assessments designed for instructional planning may not have sufficient validity and technical accuracy to support high-stakes decisions.

An appropriate assessment system may include different assessments for different categories of purpose, such as:

- assessments to support learning,
- assessments for identification of special needs,
- assessments for program evaluation and monitoring trends, and
- assessments for high-stakes accountability.

### **Conclusions**

Assessment of young children is important both to support the learning of each individual child and to provide data—at the district, state, and national level—for improving services and educational programs. At the level of the individual child, teaching and assessment are closely linked. Finding out, on an ongoing basis, what a child knows and can do, helps parents and teachers decide how to pose new challenges and provide help with what the child has not yet mastered. Teachers also use a combination of observation and formal

assessments to evaluate their own teaching and make improvements. At the policy level, data are needed about the preconditions of learning—such as the adequacy of health care, child care, and preschool services. Direct measures of children's early learning are also needed to make sure that educational programs are on track in helping students reach high standards by the end of third grade.

Assessing young children accurately is much more difficult than for older students and adults, because of the nature of early learning and because the language skills needed to participate in formal assessments are still developing. Inappropriate testing of young children has sometimes led to unfair and harmful decisions. Such testing abuses occur primarily for one of two reasons: either a test designed for one purpose is improperly used for another purpose, or testing procedures appropriate for older children are used inappropriately with younger children. In making its recommendations, the Resource Group has emphasized how technical requirements for assessments must be tailored to each assessment purpose, and we have tried to explain how the increasing reliability and validity of measurement for ages from birth to age 8 should guide decisions about what kinds of assessments can be administered accurately at each age.

Four categories of assessment purpose were identified, with accompanying recommendations for educators and policymakers:

**1. Assessing to promote children's learning and development.** The most important reason for assessing young children is to help them learn. To this end, assessments should be closely tied to preschool and early grades curriculum, and should be a natural part of instructional activities. Policymakers should support the development or provision of assessment materials, to be used instructionally, that exemplify important and age appropriate learning goals. States should also support professional development to help teachers learn to use benchmark information to extend children's thinking.

**2. Assessing to identify children for health and special services.** Screening or a referral procedure should be in place to ensure that children suspected of having a health or learning problem are referred for in-depth evaluation. Given the potential for misuse of cognitive screening measures, states that mandate screening tests should monitor how they are used and should take extra steps to avoid inappropriate uses. IQ-like tests should not be used to exclude children from school or to plan instruction. Often, the need for costly assessments could be eliminated if intensive language and literacy programs were more broadly available for all of the groups deemed educationally at-risk, e.g., children living in poverty, children with mild cognitive and language disabilities, and children with early reading difficulties.

*Ultimately, our goal is to set high expectations for early learning and development, to make sure that no child who falls behind goes unnoticed, and at the same time to help parents and the public understand how varied are the successful paths of early learning, depending on the rate of development, linguistic and cultural experiences, and community contexts.*

Goal 1 Early Childhood  
Assessments Resource  
Group, 1998

**3. Assessing to monitor trends and evaluate programs and services.** The kinds of assessment that teachers use in preschool and the early grades to monitor children's learning are not sufficiently reliable or directly comparable for uses outside the classroom. Before age 5, assessment systems designed to gather data at the state or national level should focus on social indicators that describe the conditions of learning, e.g., the percentage of low-income children who attend quality preschool programs. Beginning at age 5, it is possible to develop large-scale assessment systems to report on trends in early learning, but matrix sampling should be used to ensure technical accuracy and at the same time protect individual children from test misuse.

**4. Assessing academic achievement to hold individual students, teachers, and schools accountable.** *There should be no high-stakes accountability testing of individual children before the end of third grade.* This very strong recommendation does not imply that members of the Resource Group are against accountability or against high standards. In fact, instructionally

relevant assessments designed to support student learning should reflect a clear continuum of progress in Grades K, 1, and 2 that leads to expected standards of performance for the third and fourth grades. Teachers should be accountable for keeping track of how well their students are learning and for responding appropriately, but the technology of testing is not sufficiently accurate to impose these decisions using an outside assessment.

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Adapted: Shepard, L.; Kagan, S. L. & Wurtz, E., (Eds.). (1998). *Principles and recommendations for early childhood assessments*. Washington, DC: National Education Goals Panel.

## Principles of Assessment and Evaluation

Assessment and evaluation that support and enhance children's learning and teachers' decision-making are based on a number of important principles. The following general principles should guide decisions, policies, and practices when assessing young children.

### ***Benefits for the Learner***

The learner should be at the heart of all assessment practices. Assessment and evaluation should benefit the learner either in direct services to be provided or in improved quality of educational programs and instructional strategies.

- **A classroom assessment and evaluation program is primarily concerned with enabling the learner.** Children can and do improve. An effective assessment and evaluation program focuses on identifying what children can do and documenting evidence that children are developing and improving.
- **An effective assessment and evaluation program is constructive.** Assessment and evaluation support and enhance learning and development by focusing on what they are attempting to do. Assessment and evaluation do not focus on deficits or negative aspects.

*Students can hit any target they can see that holds still for them.*

Stiggins, 1999
- **Assessment and evaluation facilitate the transfer of learning.** When children are encouraged to reflect on and evaluate their own learning, they gain understanding of the processes they have used. As they develop this metacognitive awareness, they are able to achieve control of the strategies and skills they have practiced and to deliberately use these in new situations. Similarly, when teachers reflect on and evaluate various aspects of a learning experience, they gain important insights which they can apply to new learning activities.
- **Assessment and evaluation support the learner's risk-taking.** Assessment and evaluation look not only at what a child can do, but also at what the child is trying to do. The development of oral communication is a dynamic process. It requires that the

child become aware of particular skills or strategies and seek new ways and opportunities to use them. Through use, the child gains insights, begins to formulate generalizations, and internalizes what he or she has learned. The process is one of experimentation and of repeated trial and error. Obviously, this can only take place in an environment that supports risk-taking, one that allows and recognizes errors and corrections as part of the development process.

### ***Considerations, Forms, and Methods***

Young children learn at different rates and in different ways than do older students and adults. Assessment and evaluation programs must be tailored accordingly.

- **Assessments and evaluations should be tailored to a specific purpose and should be reliable, valid, and fair for that purpose.** Assessments and evaluations designed for one purpose or grade level are not necessarily valid if used for other purposes or grade levels. Procedures and policies may need to be developed to ensure that assessment practices lead to results that are accurate and useful for the given purpose.
- **Assessments should be age-appropriate in both content and the method(s) of data collection.** Assessments should address the full range of learning and developmental areas, including language, cognition, physical health and well-being, motor skills, social and emotional, general knowledge, and approaches to learning. Methods of assessment should recognize that children often need familiar contexts in order to fully demonstrate their skills and abilities. Sometimes the teacher may need to rely on alternatives to paper-and-pencil tasks for accurate data.

*Assessment avoids approaches that place children in artificial situations, impede the usual learning and developmental experiences in the classroom, or divert children from their natural learning processes.*

National Association for the  
Education of Young Children &  
National Association of Early  
Childhood Specialists in State  
Departments of Education, 1991

instruction. Similarly, assessment and evaluation allow for equal opportunities for both boys and girls.

- **Assessment and evaluation are subjective.** All assessment and evaluation procedures involve making judgments. A judgment is subjective, and making judgments is a subjective process. The very process of choosing which assessment tool to use is, in itself, subjective. However, judgments are more reliable when they are based on multiple authentic evidence. The teacher, therefore, interprets judgments

- **Assessment and evaluation are current and free of cultural, gender, and linguistic bias.** To ensure that evaluation procedures are fair for all children, the teacher chooses procedures and instruments that do not place any child or group of children at a disadvantage. The teacher sensitively and thoughtfully adapts and modifies procedures as required in order to accommodate children's cultural backgrounds, life experiences, and facility with the language of

cautiously and interprets them in the context of his or her knowledge of the individual child, of the learning situation, and of the process of learning in general.

- **Effective assessment and evaluation are comprehensive.** Assessment and evaluation focus on all the goals of the program, not just those which can be easily and objectively assessed. While it is often difficult to evaluate, for example, the development of attitudes and values (to work cooperatively with others), or the development of higher order, more complex skills and behaviors (skill in facilitating group problem-solving), these are nevertheless given appropriate emphasis. It is better to make a tentative, subjective decision about an important goal or stage of development (ability to select a suitable chapter book), than an absolute, objective judgment about a trivial one (spelling “calendar” correctly).
- **Effective decision-making is based on systematic opportunities to observe children and their learning in a supportive environment.** To demonstrate what the teacher wishes to assess and evaluate, children must engage in specific tasks and activities where they display the attitudes, skills and knowledge a teacher wishes to find out about. A child can best do this in an environment that is encouraging and supportive. To make valid judgments about any aspect of a child's development, the teacher, therefore, ensures that assessment elicits from a child whatever it is the teacher wishes to find out about and that this takes place in an appropriate climate.

### ***Users and Uses***

Effective assessment and evaluation of learning relies upon gathering data from multiple sources in varied formats. Teachers look beyond a single performance or outcome and ask how, why, and when the child is doing something or behaving in a particular way. The child is also encouraged to reflect on their own learning, considering both the processes used and the product completed.

- **Assessment and evaluation encourage the child to have an important role to play in monitoring his or her own learning and development.** Assessment and evaluation are not something that is done to students. The process recognizes learners as active participants in their own learning and in the evaluation of that learning. The teacher helps to make learning activities purposeful by sharing expectations with children and encouraging them to reflect on their own growth.
- **Parents should be a valued source of assessment information, as well as an audience for assessment results.** Because of the fallibility of direct measures of young children, assessments should include multiple sources of evidence, especially reports from parents and teachers. Assessment results should be shared with parents as part of an ongoing process that involves parents in their child's education.



- **The teacher selects assessment and evaluation procedures and instruments in the light of program goals, curricular expectations, learning opportunities, and classroom practices.** The context of the learning situation determines the appropriateness of any particular assessment and evaluation technique or instrument. Assessment and evaluation are integrated with instruction; children have systematic opportunities to develop those learnings which are the focus of assessment and evaluation.
- **Assessment and evaluation are an integral part of instructional decision-making. In this process, the teacher is the major instructional decision-maker.** Assessment and evaluation imply that, somewhere along the child's learning path, certain judgments and decisions are made. Values are implicit in this process. Teachers cannot distance themselves from these judgments and decisions, nor should they. No one other than the classroom teacher has the range or depth of information about the child's classroom learning and performance. However, as classroom teachers collaborate with other professionals, they gain additional information and valuable guidance. The insights acquired through such consultation assist the teacher with instructional decision-making. In the last analysis, the classroom teacher maintains the prime responsibility for assessment and evaluation of the children in the classroom.
- **Assessment and evaluation imply that, at some time, decisions will be made and some action will follow.** Assessment and evaluation are purposeful: information is collected, interpreted, and synthesized in order to enhance the teacher's and children's decision-making. Obtaining information about a particular aspect of learning or a particular component of the program implies that, at some time in the future, some course of action will follow. The teacher does not have time to gather information which is not useful in terms of the learning situation. The teacher continually asks, "What will I do when I find out X?"
- **Assessment and evaluation are based on multiple observations.** In order to make decisions or judgments about any aspect of learning, the teacher observes the representation of that learning a number of times in a number of contexts. On any one single occasion, in any one given situation (working alone rather than working with a partner), or through any one medium of representation (writing rather than oral presentation), a child's behavior may not be a valid indication of learning. The teacher obtains a more accurate and more complete picture of the child's learning by collecting multiple, diverse evidence of student accomplishments.





## Supporting Learning: Assessment/Evaluation/Reporting

In the primary program

<i>We used to...</i>	<i>but...</i>	<i>So now...</i>	<i>because...</i>
Place more emphasis on what children could not or should not do	We learned this focus undermined the confidence of many children, and we could be more supportive of their accomplishments.	We begin with what children can do, then consider their learning needs.	This helps them to develop confidence and gives a foundation for building and further refining skills and knowledge.
Fail children who did not meet pre-set expectations for behavior or ability to do tasks	We found that some children doubted their ability to learn and this increased the probability of their dropping out of school.	Teachers give children the support needed to allow them to make continuous progress.	This maintains their self-esteem and confidence, the prompting of further learning strengthening the disposition to learn.
Use pencil-and-paper tasks as the main way of assessing and evaluating children	We now know this gave a limited view of what children could do.	We encourage children to represent their learning in a variety of ways (show what they know).	This provides opportunities for more children to demonstrate their intelligence and to be successful learners.
Compare learners to each other	This made comparisons more important than the actual learning.	Each learner is evaluated on what he or she can do in relation to the Widely-Held Expectations and skills are continually refined.	This helps each child feel valued as a learner and builds on individual strengths, which encourages a good start toward lifelong learning.
Use checklists for children's report cards	They gave limited information about what children could do.	We use information from observations, conferences, and collections of children's work to develop anecdotal reports.	They give more comprehensive information about what children can do.
Use letter grades for reporting children's progress (A, B, C, G, S, NI)	Letter grades were dependent on teacher and parent interpretation and often focused on surface knowledge rather than understanding.	We use anecdotal reports to describe children's learning.	They give a more detailed picture of what children can do and identify future learning goals.
Exclude children from the assessment and evaluation process	This did not encourage the development of self-evaluation skills.	Children are encouraged to take a more active role in assessing and evaluating their own progress and with the help of the teacher, set future learning goals.	As children construct meaning of the world around them, this process encourages self-evaluation, independent learning, and a commitment to further learning.
Plan conferences for parents and teachers to exchange information	This often overlooked the people with the most relevant information—the children as developing learners.	Teachers are beginning to plan ways to include children in the conference with parents.	Together they can develop a shared understanding of children's abilities, interests and learning needs, resulting in the setting of realistic learning goals.